Against the Grain

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The Book Pricing Update: Books in Computer Science

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Book Pricing Update — Books in Computer Science

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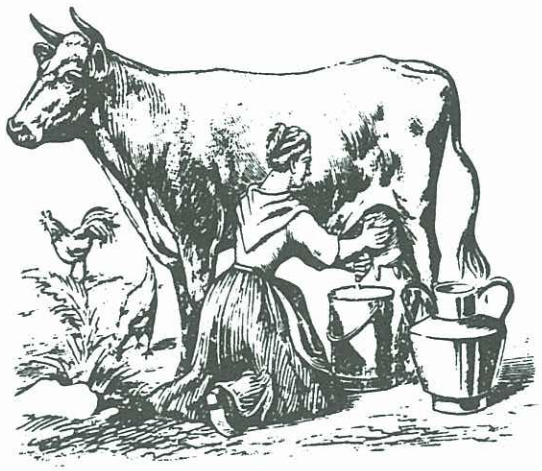

Books in computer science are a special challenge to librarians who are reluctant to invest in "popular" computer books and yet must satisfy patrons' needs for the latest information on the newest systems. The volatility of the computer world fuels a perpetual high-demand market for publishers. Average list prices rose 15% from 1995 to 1996 and 12% from 1996 to 1997. A perusal of the numbers for 1995-1997 shows that publishers face their own challenge, which is simply to keep up. Blackwell bibliographers examined 1447 popular computer books between 1995 and 1997. They fall into several broad categories that this column will analyze.

A PC's operating system (OS) is a program that translates keyboard and mouse commands into the computer's machine language and, in turn, translates computer processes into comprehensible information on the screen. Although there are several OS flavors available, computer book publishers see the world almost exclusively through rose-colored Windows, so to speak. In 1997, nearly nine out of ten titles on computer operating systems dealt with either Windows 95 or Windows NT.

Because **Microsoft** has released more than one OS, both Microsoft and publishers of Windows-related titles find themselves in the same curious situation of self-competition. In 1995, for example, new titles in MS-DOS, Windows 3.x, Windows 95, and Windows NT were competing for shelf space. In 1996, the year Win95 began appearing pre-loaded on new PCs, Windows 95 titles accounted for fully half of all OS titles, while its sister OS, Windows NT, came in at around 12%. But in 1997, 41% of all OS titles were devoted to Windows NT, while Windows 95 numbers slipped to 19%. The ascendancy of Windows NT publishing parallels the ascendancy of networked business PCs — it's rare these days to find a stand-alone computer in an office.

Titles on Linux, a distant relative of the UNIX operating system, rose from 10% of all OS titles in 1996 to 19% in '97. Aside from its power and portability, the appeal of Linux is that it's free for the downloading. While Linux-based applications are marketed, developers of the Linux "kernel" insist upon maintaining its non-proprietary nature. Major applications are yet to be written for Linux, but businesses are taking longer looks at this system.

Announcements of the death of **Macintosh** are decidedly premature. Mac-related titles held steady at around 10% of all OS-related titles for 1995-97. Users of Windows 3.x and DOS (and there are still many of us) have seen the end of new titles published on those operating systems. UNIX titles have dropped steadily from 26% in 1995 to 10% in 1997, and new titles on OS/2, a powerful but virtually ignored OS released by **IBM**, hang on at about 1% of all OS titles.

As rare as a standalone PC is one that runs a spreadsheet program without a database program or a word processor as part of a package. Titles in integrated software packages, or office "suites," have held steady at around 5% of all computer-related titles for the past three years. Microsoft owns this corner of the publishing world. Titles on MS-Office were 62% of integrated software titles in 1997. In 1996, titles on MS-Office and its sister suite, MS-Works, together accounted for 90% of new titles in this area. But the news is not all Microsoft. Titles on **Corel**'s WordPerfect suite, MS-Office's nearest thing to a competitor, rose from 9% integrated software titles in 1996 to 15% in 1997. Database programs, while included in deluxe suites, are often sold on a standalone basis, with 6% of all computer titles in 1997 focused on these programs. Again, **Microsoft** rules. Of titles on database programs, 41% were about MS-Access, up from not quite 10% in '95.

We expected dramatic increases in titles on the Internet and the World Wide Web from 1995 to 1997. The numbers did rise from 6% to 11% of all computer titles. A respectable increase, certainly, but the real impact of the Web on computer book publishing has been on programming language titles, which dent the 1995 numbers but leap to fully a quarter of all computer titles in 1996, gaining a bit more in '97. But where do the gains come from? Titles in the venerable C family of languages (C, C++, and Visual C++) actually decreased from '95 to '97 as a proportion of all computer titles. However, titles in HTML (HyperText Markup Language) and especially the Java family (Java, Javascript, and Java's evil MS-twin, Visual J++) skyrocketed. This not-quite-two-year-old language accounts for 41% of all programming language titles in 1997.

Java could well have been the most eagerly anticipated programming language in the history of computers, and for good reason. HTML makes the Web possible, but Java makes business on the Web possible. If you've filled out forms or performed calculations at a Web site, chances are you used a Java-based application.

Titles about PCs in general, such as those concerning upgrading and maintaining PCs and various non-business-related software, hold steady percentages in the single digits from 1995 through 1997. But in the past three years, whenever a subject area gets connected to the Web, its numbers soar. Graphics programs titles, for example, accounted for 4% of computer titles in 1995. By 1997, their share of computer books tripled, boosted by new titles in 3D design, animation, and Virtual Reality, "Web" appearing in the majority of these titles. It's always tempting to make predictions based on recent trends, but the ever-changing nature of the computer world can and should discourage casual prognostication.

While the Web currently dominates computer book publishing, there are those who say the Web itself as a distinct entity could well disappear — not go away, but simply become invisible. As Java becomes a language not just for Web applications but for applications in general, and as applications more and more easily communicate with each other — on the same machine and with other machines over the Net — the boundaries between our PCs and the Internet will become less apparent to us. So titles that focus on the Web could come to seem as oddly narrow as those "Fun Things to Do with Your Modem" titles of the '80s now seem.